

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH U.S. NAVY LIEUTENANT SEAN SNYDER, NAVAL AIR CREWMAN SECOND CLASS KEVIN STRICKHOUSER AND LIEUTENANT COMMANDER JAMES HEFT, PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER WITH THE OFFICE OF DEFENSE REPRESENTATIVE FOR PAKISTAN, GHAZI AIR BASE SUBJECT: RELIEF MISSIONS IN PAKISTAN TIME: 9:03 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, AUGUST 19, 2010

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.): Okay. Without further ado, let's go ahead and get started.

I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, August 19th, 2010. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating this call today.

A note to the bloggers and online journalists on the call. Please remember to state your name and your organization you're with prior to asking your question. And also if you have to place your phone on hold, please place it on mute instead. I don't want to hear any hold music; it will disrupt the conversation. And also keep your questions to one each. I want to make sure everybody has ample time to ask their questions and we're slated to go for 30 minutes today.

So at this time, I'm going to turn it over to Lieutenant Commander James Heft. He's a public affairs officer with the Office of Defense Representative for Pakistan, Ghazi Air Base.

Sir, the floor is yours and then we'll go into questions after that. Please go ahead.

LT. CMDR. HEFT: Thank you, Lieutenant Cragg. This, again, is Lieutenant Commander Jim Heft, and I'm pleased to be helping conduct this bloggers conference call today. Thank you for being here.

I want to introduce HM-15. It is a U.S. Navy helicopter squadron that is based out of Bahrain. They are currently supporting right now at the request of the government of Pakistan flood relief efforts, which are being coordinated for the United States under the lead

federal agency of the United States Agency for International Development, USAID.

To date, U.S. aircraft have assisted in evacuating about 5,000 persons and have delivered more than 500,000 pounds of food. In the five days that HM-15 have been participating, they have helped to evacuate 1,627 passengers, and 271,000 pounds of food have been delivered and growing.

Joining me on the call today is Lieutenant Sean Snyder, that's S- E-A-N, S-N-Y-D-E-R of Sanger, California and he is a pilot. And also part of his crew, Navy Air Crewman Second Class Kevin Strickhouser. That's S-T-R-I-C-K-H-O-U-S-E-R of Houston, Texas.

They have been flying missions, relief missions here in Pakistan, and again, you are welcome to ask any question related to the response effort, understanding that they're the ones who are doing the delivery. But again, as Lieutenant Cragg said, one question at a time and please keep your questions direct so that they can answer your questions pointedly.

With that, Lieutenant Cragg, the floor is yours.

LT. CRAGG: Great. Thank you so much, sir. There's a couple of people before I go ahead with the questions that called in; let me get your names. The last person I had on the list was Phil. Can I have your names please?

Q It's Maggie.

LT. CRAGG: Great, Maggie. After Maggie, please.

Q Craig Hooper.

LT. CRAGG: Craig, thank you so much.

Q Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: After Craig please.

Q This is Commander DeWalt (sp) from ODRP.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much, sir. We're going to go right into questions. Andrew, you were first. Please go ahead.

Q Right. Gentlemen, good afternoon, Andrew Lubin from Jane's Intelligence Review and Leatherneck Magazine. Appreciate you taking the time.

Can you tell us where you've been flying into and out of? I assume you're pulling people, I guess, out of Punjab and Sindh. Can you be in more detail geographically on where you've been about.

LT. SNYDER: Yes, sir. We're --

LT. CMDR. HEFT: State who you are. LT. SNYDER: -- I'm sorry, Sean Snyder. We're flying out of the Ghazi Air Base and we're flying to a little place called Colamb (sp) up in the Swat Valley is where we've done most of the operations from.

Q That's -- so you're pulling people in and out of Ghazi and into Swat and vice versa? No place else?

LT. SNYDER: That's the only place we've been operating from. There has been a little bit of an expanded flying zone going on to the east, but the Marines have mostly been doing that.

Q Okay. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Andrew. Thank you, gentlemen. Tom, please go ahead.

Q Hi. Yes, sir, thank you very much, gentlemen. My name is Tom Goring (sp). I'm with Navy Cyberspace, Navycs.com. Today, the United Nations is convening a special meeting to address the Pakistan relief efforts that are going on currently.

If you had a spot in that meeting, what would you want to tell the U.N.? Over. Hello?

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: Hi, this is AWS 2 Strickhouser. In that meeting, I'd just say we're doing a pretty good job getting cargo supplies and everything up into the Swat Valley. Any support they can give us would be appreciated.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: You're more than welcome to answer, Lieutenant. If you have anything you'd like to add, go ahead.

LT. SNYDER: Just being here. We flew all the way from the ship off the coast of Karachi all the way up here. And flying across the entire country, you could see the scope of the devastation. I don't think that there is, you know, probably anything that can be done right now to -- any aid that somebody was going to send probably wouldn't be enough to stop the suffering people are going through right now. So the -- you know, the more that they can provide -- certainly assets could be spread out more, to do more across the whole country would be very useful.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you, Tom. Jeff, go ahead.

Q All right. This is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes.

Could you talk about how the weather and other factors are hampering efforts to deliver relief supplies and rescue people? And whoever speaks, could I get -- make sure that you say your first and last name. Thank you. LT. SNYDER: Sean Snyder again. We got here -- we've been on the ground for six days in various parts of it -- or seven days,

excuse me. And the first couple of days we were here, the weather was pretty bad. They weren't able to fly any missions, I don't think, until the third day we were here. And that was even delayed because of -- you know, you've got to wait for the clouds to clear trying to get over the mountains and down in the valley.

And then again this morning, we were supposed to start basically right after sunrise, which is standard what we do. We start launching at -- first thing in the morning. And the first mission went out, the CH-46s went out and came back because they couldn't get into the valley because of the clouds.

So it's been a challenge getting the missions out every day. The last two days before today it had actually been pretty clear -- (audio break). The other things that we deal with are -- the helicopters are typically low level-type assets for delivering stuff and the higher we get in altitude, the less we can carry -- (audio break) -- the harder it is or can be to control your descent and approaches to these higher zones and stuff like that.

So definitely, we've been limited to probably about half what we can normally carry if we were down at sea level, and so, you know, that would translate to, you know, taking us twice as long to deliver the things we could deliver.

The -- I'm sorry. I am -- in the five days that we've been here, we've delivered, you know, like the commander said, 271,000 pounds and pulled out just over 1,600 people. But, you know, if it was a sea level type situation, we would've been able to probably double that.

So there are definitely some challenges, a lot of us are doing this kind of stuff for the first time, you know, the high level mountain flying. So it's -- some care and some caution on what we're doing.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much. Thank you, Jeff. Chuck, please go ahead.

Q Yes, gentlemen, Chuck Simmons from America's North Shore Journal.

Other than the Afghan air force, have you seen any other non-Pakistani air assets or ground military at work in the flood relief effort?

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: This is Petty Officer Kevin Strickhouser. Yes, the Pakistan army, they are involved on the ground in the places where we are taking supplies. They're doing a lot of --

Q I'm talking about foreign assets, sir. Foreign military.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: You're asking other than Pakistan and the United States -- (Cross talk.)

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: Okay.

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: No, sir. I have not seen any in the limited areas that we've been. But like Lieutenant Snyder said as we flew across this country, this is only a small part of the problem up here.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. Thank you, gentlemen. Ali, please go ahead.

Q Yes. Thank you. First of all, thank you guys for being in Pakistan on behalf of the people of Pakistan. We really appreciate your efforts in Pakistan.

My question is -- this is Ali from the Daily Times of Karachi. The question is, what are the difficulties you face in Pakistan? And what other things which the Pakistani government could do to further assist your operations in Pakistan? Anything that you need from the Pakistani side?

Thank you.

LT. SNYDER: This is Sean Snyder. The difficulties we're facing other than just the, you know, the flight difficulties or the challenges there that I talked about a minute ago, you know, there's a -- Ghazi is a small airbase that was set up for, you know, just for the Pakistani military and their air force to use, so the influx of aircraft and personnel in here, it made it a little bit difficult sleeping arrangements.

The first few days we were here, we slept in the hanger, on cots. We're moving into barracks now that they've made available to us. So we -- (audio break) -- with the army once the army left from Task Force Raptor who were here first, raptor, excuse me. They were here first. We, you know, moved into those barracks. There's still some guys sleeping in the hanger,

But as far as what the Pakistan government itself can do up here as long as the supplies keep flowing and they keep giving us the authorization to go places that -- you know, where the need is, at some point we'll have done as much as we can here and there'll be other places nearby that we should be able to or could be available to help.

So I think, really, the only thing would be to really just start looking ahead at things and have the approval ready.

Q Thanks a lot. LT. CRAGG: Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you, Ali. And someone just joined us. Can I get your name? Okay.

Gail, please go ahead.

Q Yes. Gail Harris with the Foreign Policy Association.

I was wondering how are you determining which -- who's determining which helicopter landing zones you go to? And who does the security as you are loading and unloading the passengers?

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: This is Petty Officer Kevin Strickhouser. Determining where we go is the Pakistan government. (Inaudible) -- us where they need us and from that point, we decide where we can fit in, because the helicopters we're flying are quite large. And it's actually the Pakistani army -- they're providing security on the ground, at the LZs that we go into. They're also riding along with us to provide more security in case we have to land in an unprepared zone.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much. Thank you, Gail. John, please go ahead.

Q Hi, this is John Doyle with 4G warblog. Thank you gentlemen, for talking to us.

Two very quick numbers questions. How many sea dragon helioss from your squadron are actually at Ghazi flying into the Swat Valley? And secondly, you talked about you could only handle about half the capacity because of the altitude. About how many people are you able to take on in an evacuation flight and about how much cargo can you bring in?

Thank you.

LT. SNYDER: This is Sean Snyder. We have been able to safely carry in about -- I think, the most we've carried in at this point is about 10,000 pounds at a time. The limitation, of course, being -- balance that with fuel would put a distance that we have to fly and the altitude and the power we need to get into the zones that we're going into. And the most passengers we've taken -- (audio break) -- have been about 80 at a time.

Q And how many aircraft do you have?

LT. SNYDER: I'm sorry. We have three of the Navy MH-53, the "Sea Dragons," and there's four of the Marine Sea Stallions, CH-53s.

Q Thank you. LT. CRAGG: Thank you, John. Thank you, Lieutenant Snyder.

Next person on the list was Chris, but he has left the conversation. The next person is Phil. Please go ahead.

Q Hi. Good morning, guys. Phil Ewing with Scoopdeck and Navy Times here in Washington.

I wanted to ask another follow-up about your aircraft. Your mission mostly is to drag a minesled close to the sea level and look for mines.

How much modification do your birds need to do this kind of heavy lift mission in terms of the gear that you would normally have for that mine countermeasure mission? And how have they been working? Are you able to get up and fly as you need to? Or are you -- I mean, the 53 is kind of an older aircraft and I'm just curious what your availability has been like for this mission?

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: This is Kevin Strickouser. The primary mission -- we do the mine countermeasures at sea level, going from a configuration to where we can tow stuff through the water do doing what we're doing now, you know -- (inaudible) -- set-up. Only takes a matter of hours to change a few parts and then we're ready to go pretty much. And the aircraft being old, but we also have a newer engine than the CH-53s, which gives us a little bit better capability for flying at the high altitudes. And so far that last five, six days we've been here, the aircraft has been performing late, no problems.

LT. SNYDER: Yes. Sean Snyder. Yes -- (inaudible) -- is absolutely correct. We've been flying missions for five days since we've been here, two aircraft all day, every day. We're 10 for 10 on the missions. Our maintenance personnel, the 59 -- well, actually, only about 35 maintainers that we brought us have been working around the clock through shifts and keeping these aircraft going.

They've been doing a really good job and the aircraft's performing well.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you, Phil.

Maggie (sp), you're next. Please go ahead.

Q Hi. Can you tell us a little bit about what you're encountering on the ground? Is there any effort amongst the civilians to organize and help themselves? Is there anything you can discern that seems to be possibly Taliban efforts to help those on the ground?

LT. SNYDER: Sean Snyder again. We haven't seen anything like that, or at least I haven't seen anything like that. We've been, you know, flying into the zones and landing, the military keeps the crowds back -- you know, for the safety of the aircraft and -- for their safety, as the aircraft's coming in, I should say. And then when we do the offload and -- the populace that are staying, the ones that aren't requesting to be evacuated out of the area are -- seem to be helping each other. The supplies go out, and they -- you know, they'll have people come out that were sitting around as we come in and help pick up stuff and walk away with it and take it to the others that are out on the sides of the zone.

But other than what we're taking in that the Pakistani military's providing, I haven't observed any other organizations really

working on the ground that I could point out. There is an aid organization here, can't remember -- (audio break) -- transported -- (audio break) -- today.

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: The World Food Programme?

LT. SNYDER: Yeah, it's somebody associated with the World Food Programme, but I'm not sure which. But the United Nations is certainly here --

(Cross talk.)

Q Can you repeat that? Which NGO?

LT. SNYDER: I'm sorry --

Q Could you repeat that? LT. SNYDER: It's the World Food Programme.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Lieutenant Snyder, did you have more to add before I go to the next caller?

LT. SNYDER: No, ma'am, I was about to ask Petty Officer Strickhouser if he had anything to say about. He gets to interface with the actual people on the ground more than I do.

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: Yeah, there's -- (audio break) -- Strickhouser. The people on the ground that we see, like the lieutenant said, it's definitely not out of control. The military's -- (audio break) -- everything under control, and -- but we don't actually get to see what goes on after we leave. We're only there for a short period of time doing our work, and that's probably the main reason we haven't seen anything else.

LT. CRAGG: Great. Thank you, gentlemen; thank you, Maggie (sp).

Craig, you are next. Please go ahead.

Q Hey, guys. Great work you're doing out there. I was wondering, just wanted to follow up and ask one quick question. Was it the 35 maintainers for the full group of CH-35s, or is that 35 maintainers for the CH-46s and your aircraft? And then, just another sneak question if I can get it in. When was the last time you guys did full-bore mine countermeasures training?

LT. SNYDER: Sean Snyder. We brought 59 total people, the HM-15 -- (inaudible) -- aircraft we brought had 59 people, 38 of those being our maintenance personnel. The total footprint for all the -- the whole (ace ?), all 15 aircraft now is 218 people. That's all their pilots and all their maintainers. I don't know how it really breaks down, how many

of which for the marine aircraft. I guess it's probably about the same proportion.

I'm sorry, that was the answer to your first question. The second one was the last time we did mine countermeasures training was right before we left Bahrain, so the last few times we flew before -- was it the 4th? Okay Petty Officer Strickhouser's also an operations guy; he told me it was the 4th, was the last time we -- (audio break) -- mission, so -- relatively recently.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, gentlemen, and thank you, Craig.

I want to make sure, did I miss anyone else that might have called in?

Okay. At this time, if anyone has any follow-on questions that didn't get asked during this roundtable, the gentlemen are only available for 30 minutes today. And I can go around -- Q Yeah, I do.

LT. CRAGG: -- the horn again. So I'm going to turn it over to Lieutenant Commander Hoeft, and then both Lieutenant Snyder and Petty Officer Strickhouser can end with any closing thoughts. But again, everyone will receive a transcript from today's call, and any follow-on questions we'll direct to Lieutenant Commander Hoeft.

Sir, the floor is yours if you want to start with any final statement.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: Thanks, I appreciate it.

Again, this is Lieutenant Commander Jim Hoeft. I can be reached at james.hoeft -- that's Hotel, Oscar, Echo, Foxtrot, Tango -- @jfc.com, as in Joint Forces Command -- .mil. So please, if you have any follow-up questions or if you'd like to call me, I'm at 757-287-2453. I don't mind doing -- having a conversation by phone either. But again, if you have a follow-up question, the floor is yours. Who's up?

Q Yeah, I do. Andrew Lubin, Leatherneck and Jane's Intelligence. Quickly, do you have any set time on station, or are you there for the duration?

PETTY OFFICER STRICKHOUSER: This is Petty Officer Kevin Strickhouser. We don't have a set time here. We came -- long as it's needed, basically. And -- so we don't really have any expectations of when we might be leaving or how long we'll stay.

Q Okay, thank you.

Q John Doyle with 4G War. Are all the army aircraft gone now? Are the Navy and Marine Corps the only folks there with rotary wing aircraft?

LT. SNYDER: It's Sean Snyder. Yes, we're the only ones here at this time.

Q Tom with Navy Cyberspace. Quick question. We've been doing quite a few humanitarian relief efforts, from tsunami, Katrina, Haiti and so forth. Have any of you been involved in any of those also?

LT. SNYDER: Neither of us -- I'm sorry, Sean Snyder. Neither of us went to Haiti. We were preparing to go out to Bahrain for our deployment, so we stayed behind. There are several people that are here with us that had just come from Haiti.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: There's someone listening -- this is Lieutenant Commander Jim Hoeft. Someone listening in on the conversation who -- I think he would be willing to step on over here and give his perspective, is Lieutenant Commander -- what is your first name?

LT. CMDR. DEREK BRADY: Derek. LT. CMDR. HOEFT: Derek Brady. That's D-E-R-E-K Brady. And he's participated in humanitarian relief ops, Haiti, I believe, most recent.

LT. CMDR. BRADY: Yes, sir. The most recent was Haiti, and also I flew down in Katrina as well.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: So -- do you have any follow-up question regarding that?

Q Well, do you see the amount of effort that's being placed that was on Katrina and in Haiti and so forth, do you see the same response from the United States that -- at the same level that you saw in those two endeavors?

LT. CMDR. BRADY: I do, as a matter of fact. When you look at what's going on here, some of it isn't always as obvious; there's helicopters in the air, there's many agencies that are putting forth effort to get this this thing done. And that was the same kind of effort that you saw through Haiti, because not one department can do it by itself. It's not just Department of Defense; State Department's here, and USAID and many others are on the ground working together in concert to try to bring relief. So in that regard, I would say there are a lot of similarities to the response.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: Are there any further questions?

Q Yeah.

Q Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I'm just confirming -- you guys are off Peleliu, and you're expecting Kearsarge to relieve you?

LT. SNYDER: Right now these individuals are from the HM-15 detachment, two out of Bahrain. They are not attached to any particular ship. However, I believe that some of the maintainers -- is that correct?

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: No, as Sean said -- no, we got a call, you know -- the flooding started, we got the call, and 72 hours later they sent us to the Peleliu. We stopped there for a couple of days and then went from the Peleliu here in Pakistan -- everybody we brought with us from our Det to Bahrain.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: The Marines that are here are off of -- (audio break). As far as future operational movements, you know very well we're not at liberty to comment on that.

Q All right. Thank you.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: Any other questions? Q Just a quick question. Are you taking embeds?

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: We have a pretty robust media program here right now. The embed program would have to be discussed with the government of Pakistan, and we'll look into it. Who is this?

Q Oh, sorry. Jeff Schogol, Stars and Stripes.

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: Hey, Jeff. I worked with you before while I was on Kearsarge.

Q Oh, yeah!

LT. CMDR. HOEFT: We'll -- talk to me offline about that, okay?

Q Okay, thanks.

LT. CRAGG: At this time, I'm going to go ahead and wrap up the roundtable. And also, I will pass everyone on the call Lieutenant Commander Hoeft's e-mail just in case you didn't copy it down, to make sure any follow-on questions will be answered.

You all have been listening to Lieutenant Commander James Hoeft, as well as guest speakers Lieutenant Sean Snyder and Petty Officer Second Class Naval Air Crewman Kevin Strickhouser. Thank you -- and then I know there was another lieutenant, I apologize. I believe it was Lieutenant -- can you say or state your name?

LT. CMDR. BRADY: Lieutenant Commander Derek Brady.

LT. CRAGG: Sorry about that, sir.

Just to remind everybody, I will send everyone the transcript from today's call. We will also post it to www.dodlive.mil, and any follow-on questions, please, you can send them to me and I'll forward them to Lieutenant Commander Hoeft as well.

Thank you, everyone, for listening today. This concludes today's roundtable. Feel free to disconnect at any time. Thank you very much, gentlemen, for calling in today.

END.